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ABSTRACT

Inconsistencies in the definition of transfer from two-year to four-year institutions and in the calculation of the transfer rate have given rise to incongruous findings. For example, one researcher in 1989 reported a transfer rate of less than 12% for the colleges in Illinois at the same time that the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges found a transfer rate exceeding 42% for the California colleges. Taking into account imperatives based upon the enrollment and transfer patterns of the colleges' heterogeneous student body, a consistent transfer indicator can be achieved by defining potential transfer students as all those entering in a given year who have no prior college experience, who stay at the community college long enough to complete at least 12 college-credit units, and who take one or more classes at the university within 4 years after original college entry. During fall 1989, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) invited researchers from a broad sample of community colleges nationwide to provide data according to this definition, and 47 institutions from 16 states complied. The study revealed that just under 50% of the students entering with no prior college experience in the Fall of 1984 had completed 12 or more units within the ensuing 4 years. Of that group, 23% had taken classes at a university. In 1990, CSCC again asked the colleges to provide data on their transfers, and 68 complied; 48% of the students entering in fall 1985 with no prior college experience had earned at least 12 credits, and 24% of them had transferred. (JMC)

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by

Arthur M. Cohen

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Defining a transfer indicator enables the community college to describe its achievements and quantify its successes in an understandable way. The following is an update of a presentation to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' 1990 Annual Convention. Dr. Cohen provides a compelling argument for the community college to begin and/or continue to pursue research efforts as they focus on transfer. Dr. Arthur M. Cohen is director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is a national scholar and leading researcher on issues related to community colleges.

Judith S. Eaton, Director
NCAAT

The Transfer Indicator

by

Arthur M. Cohen

The community colleges of America provide five basic educative services for their students -- preparation for transfer, preparation for job entry, literacy development, career upgrading, and personal interest activities. The emphasis placed on one or another of these functions has shifted over time and in different locales because of student interests and abilities, state policies and funding priorities, and patterns of institutional leadership. But all the services have remained intact and most colleges pursue them all with greater or lesser vigor.

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How well are the colleges doing? Attempts to generate a plausible response stumble on issues of special-group politics, philosophies of education, theories of human development, desired societal directions, and other areas of interpretation. How are the colleges doing relative to what? For which of their multiple constituencies? In which of their service components?

Each of the colleges' educative services should have its own achievement indicator. And each indicator should be based on an easily understood definition, using data that are feasibly collected. To define an indicator is not to deny the importance of the colleges' other functions. It is to help describe only one of the functions, but to describe it so that it can be readily understood by the public and legislators. It is to offer a response to the critics who, in the absence of valid data, rely on their prejudices to deny the community colleges' importance. It is to help the professionals in the colleges to be sensitive to their effects.

Toward a Transfer Rate Indicator

Transfer rates have been reported from time to time, but no valid conclusions can be drawn because the data are too sparse, and the definitions of transfer are not consistent. Few colleges maintain data on the number of their students who transfer. Many college leaders fear the untoward comparisons that are often made between the progress of their students and those who begin as freshmen in the selective four-year institutions. Furthermore, the colleges receive funding based on the number of students who take classes, not on the number who complete programs or go on to further education; hence, there are no incentives to organize systems to produce the data.

The definitions of transfer are not stable. Is a high school graduate who takes a summer class at a community college before entering a university in the fall a transfer? Is a university student who takes classes at a local community college a transfer? How many units must a community college student complete before matriculating at a university to be called a transfer? How should those students who stop out of the education system for a few years before transferring be counted? If the universities accepted as transfers only those students who had completed associate degree requirements, the definitional question would be at least partially resolved. But the issue of what to use as the denominator in calculating a transfer rate would remain open.

The inconsistent definitions give rise to incredibly diverse conclusions. Flaherty (1989) reported a transfer rate of less than 12 percent for the colleges in Illinois at the same time that the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges (1989) found a transfer rate exceeding 42 percent for the California colleges. Are the two systems that disparate? Of course not. Each reporter used a different mode of calculation. Flaherty divided the number of students transferring to an Illinois college or university in 1988 by *the total enrollment in "pre-baccalaureate programs" during the previous fall.* The Chancellor's Office divided the number transferring in 1988-89 by the *"number of California high school graduates who entered community colleges three years prior to transfer"* (p. 12).

Other ways of estimating transfer rates have been made. Berman and Weiler (1989) surveyed the students who had been enrolled in 28 colleges in spring term, 1988, but who had not returned in the fall, and found that 26 percent of those who had taken six or more credits at the community college had matriculated at a four-year college or university. The Washington State Board for Community Colleges (1989) surveyed a sample of bachelors degree recipients and found that 48 percent had transferred credits from a Washington community college. The National Center for Education Statistics analyzed the transcripts of the students who had participated in the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 and estimated that 20 percent of those receiving bachelor's degrees had attended a community college at some time (Adelman, 1987). Palmer (1986) listed several other single-college and state-wide studies that had similarly variant definitions and data bases, hence widely different rates of transfer.

Imperatives for an Indicator

Can an acceptable indicator of transfer rates be developed? That seems a plausible task if certain imperatives are attended to. The definition should *not* use as its denominator all entrants, because that figure includes students who already have degrees. It should *not* include only those students intending to transfer, because data on student intentions are unreliable. It should *not* include only the students just out of high school, because many students stop out of schooling and return to the community college when they are older. It should *not* be based on students who take only academic courses, because occupational education contributes many transfers. It should *not* include only the full-time students, because part-time students account for two-thirds of the enrollment and many of the transfers. It should *not* include associate degree recipients only, because most of the transfers do so without obtaining a degree from the community college. It should *not* include sophomores only, because half the students transfer before obtaining as many as 30 units at the community college.

What *should* the definition include? The denominator *should* include only those students who take college-credit classes because most remedial and non-credit work is non-transferable. It *should* include students who complete some minimum number of units at the community college, who have been enrolled long enough for the college staff to have a chance to work with them. It *should* allow at least a four-year span between community college entrance and transfer because few students matriculate and then move on within only a couple of years. And it *should* be based on the data that are feasibly compiled at the colleges because, if the transfer rate is to have any meaning for the college staff, they must be able to combine their own student records with the information they obtain from the receiving institutions.

Calculating a Transfer Rate

Using those imperatives, an indicator of transfer rate can be defined as *all students entering in a given year who have no prior college experience and who stay at the community college long enough to complete at least twelve college-credit units and who take one or more classes at the university within four years after original college entry.*

During the fall of 1989, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, under Ford Foundation sponsorship, invited the data compilers in a broad sample of community colleges nation-wide to provide data according to that definition, and 47 institutions from 16 states complied. Findings were that just under 50 percent of the students entering with no prior college experience in fall of 1984 had completed 12 or more units within the ensuing four years. Of that group, 23 percent had taken classes in a university. In 1990, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges again asked the colleges to provide data on their transfers and by January 1991, 68 colleges had supplied the information. Forty-eight percent of the students entering in fall of 1985, with no prior college experience, had earned at least 12 credits and 24 percent of them had transferred. (These are undoubtedly undercounts because most of the colleges could not obtain information from all institutions to which their students might have transferred, for example those out of state or in some cases the independent universities within the same state.)

Is the indicator valid? It attends to the imperatives noted above. It is readily understandable. It is based on feasibly collected data. And it sends a clear signal to legislators and lay people who have little patience with elaborate caveats and whose tolerance for what appears to be deliberate obfuscation may be limited. The community colleges do contribute to students' progress in higher education and their leaders should be able to repair to a consistent definition and reliable data when they are challenged to describe that contribution. Furthermore, the colleges deserve a point of reference that allows them to estimate the effects of special programs introduced to enhance the transfer figures.

The community colleges must themselves compile and report the data necessary to keep the indicator current. They do not have to maintain unwieldy record systems that include hundreds of variables on each student; such systems may actually detract from a college's

ability to provide basic information about student progress. The college's data compilers should routinely petition the state offices, state university systems, and independent senior institutions to send data about the students who have transferred. These data may be forthcoming if the colleges send the student identification numbers to the outside agency with the simple question, "Which of these students have shown up at your institution?" This type of data collection, sustainable through college funds, is much preferable to those data for which outside help or supplemental grants must be sought.

Next Steps

A valid indicator of transfer rates can be developed but will it be adopted? Two obstacles must be overcome. The first is that at present, support for an indicator is sparse because it is not important for college managers to know the transfer rate; funding rests on counting the students sitting in classes each term, not on the number who have progressed to successive levels of schooling. A less kindly view would hold that it is important for the college leaders to *not* know the transfer rate. Lack of knowledge allows them to refute any figure with which they are confronted, saying that the percentage is based on an inappropriate definition or on unreliable data.

A second obstacle is in the sources of the data themselves. No one data base provides information on all the colleges' service areas. The success of the personal interest, job entry, and career progress functions suggest separate student tracking studies that rest on surveying appropriate samples of current and former students. Literacy development can be calculated from most colleges' own data if the variable, "Began in remedial classes and entered the collegiate program," is accepted as a valid indicator. But the transfer indicator can only be derived by retrieving data from other agencies. The college records must be examined relative to records maintained by four-year colleges and universities. Routine updating of a transfer indicator depends on effecting such a procedure to do that.

The coming year will see the Center for the Study of Community Colleges encouraging the same institutions, and several more, to supply the transfer data for their 1986 cohort. Center staff members will also be working with state agency officials to encourage them to assist the colleges in obtaining the necessary data from the universities. But in the long run, any continued derivation of a transfer indicator must center in the colleges themselves.

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